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The Root Causes Of Domestic & Sexual Violence

As a society, now more than any other time in our recent history, we are opening our hearts to those impacted by domestic and sexual violence. As the #MeToo movement pushes into our collective consciousness, so has the impulse to believe survivors. Many whose voices were silent are now sharing their stories. And they are being believed.

When people finally feel safe to share stories of their past traumas in order to move towards healing, we as a society should rejoice, right? When those who have harmed others are being held accountable, this is a good thing, isn't it? It seems that answer is not as clear as one might think.

At the same time that survivors are coming forward, our elected officials are showing the limits of their belief of survivors and their understanding of the issues. This fracture has brought an important question to the forefront:

Is there something about domestic and sexual violence that makes believing survivors particularly difficult?

In order to understand the an-

swer to this question we need to examine the root causes of domestic and sexual violence. According to the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, "inequality and discrimination are root causes of violence against women, influenced by the historical and structural power imbalances between women and men which exist in varying degrees across all communities in the world."

Historically, men have had more power in society in many ways, (economic, governmental, social), reinforced by systems, policies and culture. In our society, heterosexual whiteness has also been granted more power. Domestic and sexual violence are thus in the same category as violence that specifically impacts other marginalized groups. All have the same root, the same disease (inequality and discrimination), but different symptoms (domestic, sexual, race-based violence).

Addressing inequality and discrimination is an essential compo-



nent of any effort to prevent domestic and sexual violence. Without a clear examination of the underlying causes of this type of violence, we're at risk for falling back to our own assumptions and bias-

es based on who we are and what privileges we may have in society. If we hope to ever live in a society where domestic and sexual violence is rare, we need to universally understand the root cause and work collectively towards alleviating it among all levels of society.

The Centers for Disease Control offers a framework for approaching this complex work in communities. Umbrella embraces this framework. Its ecological approach works at the individual, relationship, community and societal levels.

On the individual level, we work with children, youth and adults to model attitudes and behaviors that value healthy, respectful, non-violent relationships. On the relationship level we work to empower people to identify characteristics of unhealthy relationships and help point them towards options to al-

ter the situation they are in. On the community level, we implement bystander prevention strategies that are evidenced based and promote bystanders as key individuals to interrupting abusive behaviors and share knowledge about root causes of gender-based violence. Lastly, on the societal level, we work with local and statewide partners to create and promote policies that enforce laws which hold harm-doers accountable and others that support equality for all.

This Domestic Violence Awareness Month we urge you to examine the root causes of domestic and sexual violence. This type of community harm is not random or inevitable. As discussed above, it is a direct result of inequality and discrimination, reinforced over many generations in different degrees, worldwide. It is only together, through honestly looking at how our society explicitly and implicitly supports this system, paired with our own accountability in that dynamic, that we will be able to truly move to a time where domestic and sexual violence are no more.

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